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SPARK IGNITER FOR GAS TURBINE ENGINE

CROSS REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS

[0001] This Application is related to subject matter in the following patent applications, which are of common inventorship and filed concurrently herewith:

SENSOR FOR DETECTION OF SPARK IN IGNITER IN GAS TURBINE ENGINE, SN __/__, __;

METHOD OF INFORMING PILOT OF AIRCRAFT OF SPARK DETECTED IN GAS TURBINE ENGINE, SN __/__, __;

PASSIVE, HIGH-TEMPERATURE AMPLIFIER FOR AMPLIFYING SPARK SIGNALS DETECTED IN IGNITER IN GAS TURBINE ENGINE, SN __/__, __;

INTEGRAL SPARK DETECTOR IN FITTING WHICH SUPPORTS IGNITER IN GAS TURBINE ENGINE, SN __/__, __; and

DETECTING SPARK IN IGNITER OF GAS TURBINE ENGINE BY DETECTING SIGNALS IN GROUNDED RF SHIELDING, SN __/__, __.

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

[0002] The invention relates to gas turbine engines, and igniters therein.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

[0003] This Background will explain why the lack of absolute certainty in lifetimes of igniters used in gas turbine aircraft engines can impose significant costs on the owners of the aircraft utilizing the engines.

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[0004] Figure 1 is a highly schematic illustration of a gas turbine engine 3, containing a combustor 6. Fuel 9 is sprayed into the combustor. An igniter 12, which functions in a roughly analogous manner to a spark plug in an automobile, produces a spark, or plasma discharge (not shown), which initially ignites the jet fuel.

[0005] After initial ignition, the igniter 12 can be repeatedly sparked thereafter, primarily as a safety measure. That is, in a modern engine, under normal circumstances, it is extremely unlikely for a flame-out to occur in the combustor 6. However, unexpected situations, such as an abrupt cross-wind, can affect the environment within the combustor, and resulting loss of flame.

[0006] In addition, certain flight conditions make the unlikely event of a flame-out slightly more probable. Thus, for example, the igniter 12 may be activated when the aircraft enters a rain squall, or other situation which may disturb steady-state conditions in the combustor 6.

[0007] The igniters 12, like all mechanical components, have useful lives which eventually expire, at which time the igniters must be replaced. However, this expiration-and-replacement can create a situation in aircraft which is expensive.

[0008] A primary reason is that the approach of an igniter to the end of its lifetime is not marked by readily detectable events. That is, at some point, the igniter completely ceases to generate a plasma, or spark. However, prior to that point, the igniter may sporadically generate sparks.

[0009] As explained above, the sparking is not, in general, required to maintain the combustor flame. Consequently, the sporadic sparking would only be noticed if an actual flame-out occurred, and if the sporadic sparking were ineffective to induce a re-light. Since such a combination of events is seen as unlikely, the sporadic sparking is not readily noticed. The impending expiration of the useful life of the igniter is similarly not noticed.

[0010] Another reason is that, while all igniters may be constructed as identically as possible, nevertheless, those igniters do not all possess the same lifetimes. Nor do all igniters experience identical events during their lifetimes. Thus, it is not known exactly when a given igniter will expire.

[0011] Thus, the point in time when an igniter must be replaced is not known with certainty. One approach to solving this problem is to perform preventative maintenance, by replacing the igniters when they are still functioning. While the cost of a new igniter and the manpower required to install it is not great, the early replacement does impose another cost, which can be significant.

[0012] The aircraft in which the igniter is being replaced represents a revenue source measured in thousands of dollars per hour. If the aircraft is rendered non-functional for, say, two hours during replacement of an igniter, the revenue lost during that time is substantial.

[0013] Therefore, the uncertain lifetimes of igniters in

gas turbine aircraft engines can impose significant losses in revenue.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[0014] Normal operation of an igniter in a gas turbine engine causes erosion of an insulator inside the igniter. In one form of the invention, an auxiliary ground electrode is embedded within that insulator, and the erosion eventually exposes the auxiliary electrode. The igniter is designed so that the exposure occurs at the time when the igniter should be replaced.

[0015] The exposed auxiliary ground electrode can be detected by the fact that, when a spark occurs, a small current travels through the auxiliary ground electrode. When that current is detected, its presence indicates the exposure. Alternately, the exposed auxiliary ground electrode can be visually detected by a human observer, perhaps by using a borescope.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0016] Figure 1 is a simplified schematic of a gas turbine engine.

[0017] Figure 2 illustrates an igniter 12, shown in Figure 1.

[0018] Figures 3 and 4 are enlarged views of end E in Figure 2.

[0019] Figures 5 and 6 illustrate changes in geometry of end E which the Inventors have observed.

[0020] Figure 7 illustrates one form of the invention.

[0021] Figures 8 and 9 are views resembling insert 84 in Figure 7.

[0022] Figure 10 is a perspective view of part of Figure 7.

[0023] Figure 11 is a perspective, cut-away view of one form of the invention.

[0024] Figure 12 is a cross-sectional view of the apparatus of Figure 11.

[0025] Figure 13 is a perspective view of the apparatus of Figure 11.

[0026] Figure 14 illustrates one form of the invention.

[0027] Figure 15 illustrates a sequence of events occurring in one form of the invention.

[0028] Figure 16 illustrates two distances D9 and D10, over which two electric fields are generated.

[0029] Figure 17 illustrates one mode of constructing auxiliary electrode 72 in Figure 15.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

[0030] Figure 2 illustrates an igniter 12 used in the prior art. An electrical connector (not shown) is threaded onto threads 21, and contains an electrical contact (not shown) which mates with the end 24 of electrode 27. Insulator 30 isolates electrode 27 from the shell 33 of the igniter 12.

[0031] End E of the igniter 12 is shown in Figures 3 and

4. A very simplified explanation of the physics involved in plasma generation will be given.

[0032] In operation, a high voltage is applied to the electrode 27, thereby creating a voltage difference, or potential difference, V between points P1 and P2 in Figure 3. The electric field in that region equals the potential difference V divided by the distance D between the points P1 and P2. For example, if the voltage is 20,000 volts and the distance D is 10 millimeters, or 0.01 meter, then the electric field equals $20,000/0.01$, or 2 million volts per meter.

[0033] The electric field is designed to exceed the dielectric breakdown strength of the material, or medium, lying between points P1 and P2. That material is a mixture of air plus fuel. However, the field does not exceed the breakdown strength of insulator 30, and that strength exceeds that of the air-fuel mixture.

[0034] When breakdown occurs, the electric field strips electrons away from the atoms in the medium, producing positively charged ions and free electrons. The electric field drives the free electrons in a direction parallel with the electric field. However, during that movement, those temporarily free electrons will collide with other ions. Also, thermal motion of the ions and electrons will also bring them together in collisions.

[0035] In the collisions, the electrons will be captured by the ions, and will drop to a lower energy state, releasing heat and light, in the form of an electric arc which is called a plasma,

which is indicated as lightning bolt 40 in Figure 4. This process continues as long as the electric field is present.

[0036] The Inventors have observed one result of the operation just described. As indicated in Figure 5, the insulator 30 becomes eroded from the phantom shape 50 to the curved shape 53. In addition, the electrode 27 becomes eroded from the phantom shape 56 to the solid shape 59. Corners 33A also become eroded.

[0037] The Inventors believe that one or more of the following agencies are responsible for the erosion. One agency is the corrosive nature of the plasma: free electrons are very reactive, and seek to bind to any available atoms or ions which are nearby. Also, the generation of free electrons from oxygen, which is present in the air, creates ionized oxygen, which is also highly reactive.

[0038] A third agency is that the plasma creates a high-temperature environment. A high temperature, by definition, represents agitated atoms and molecules with high velocities. High-velocity atoms and molecules react more readily with stationary objects when they collide with the objects.

[0039] Possibly a fourth agency is the fact that the plasma generates high-frequency photons, in the ultra-violet, UV, and perhaps into the X-ray regions of the spectrum. It is well known that UV and X-radiation can damage numerous types of material.

[0040] Irrespective of the precise causes of the erosion, the erosion illustrated in Figure 5 eventually causes the igniter 12 to eventually stop functioning. A primary reason is illustrated

in Figure 6. Previously, prior to the erosion, voltage was applied between points P1 and P2 in Figure 6. However, after the erosion, point P2 has effectively moved to point P3. Distance D has now become longer distance D2. The electric field, which causes the ionization and thus the plasma, is now weaker.

[0041] Continuing the example given above, if distance D2 is 20 millimeters, then the electric field becomes $20,000/0.020$, or one million volts per meter, half its original value. Eventually, distance D2 becomes so great that the electric field does not reliably exceed the dielectric breakdown strength of the air-fuel mixture, and ionization ceases to occur.

[0042] Figure 7 illustrates one form of the invention. An auxiliary electrode 72 is embedded in the insulator 75. The tip 78 is covered by the insulator-material in region 81, as indicated by the insert 84. Auxiliary electrode 72 may be connected to the shell 33, as at region 90.

[0043] Initially, current enters electrode 27 as indicated by arrow 84, jumps to the shell 33 through the plasma 85, and exits the shell 33 into the engine, through multiple paths, such as through its mounting threads, as indicated by arrow 86.

[0044] As erosion occurs, the insulator 75 departs from its initial shape indicated by phantom lines 92 in Figure 8. Tip 78 of the auxiliary electrode 72 now becomes exposed. Now, when a high voltage is applied to the igniter, two paths exist for a plasma to follow. One is the usual path P5 in Figure 9. The other path is indicated as P6 of Figure 9, and runs from the central

electrode 27 to the now-exposed auxiliary electrode 72.

[0045] Restated, two current-return-paths are available to the central electrode 72. Path P5 runs to the shell 33, in the usual manner. Path P6 runs to the now-exposed auxiliary electrode 72. Eventually, further erosion will lengthen path P5, and cause plasma formation along that path to terminate. That is, path P5 in Figure 9 initially can be represented by distance D in Figure 6. After sufficient erosion, path P5 in Figure 9 will be represented by distance D2 in Figure 6, and, as explained above, no plasma will be generated along path P5 when distance D2 becomes sufficiently large.

[0046] However, auxiliary plasma path P6 is still available in Figure 9 at this time. A plasma can still be generated, and the lifetime of the igniter has been increased.

[0047] The preceding discussion presented the auxiliary electrode 72 in Figure 7 in the form of a rod. Figure 10 illustrates such a rod in perspective view, surrounded by insulator 75.

[0048] In an alternate embodiment, a cylinder is used. Figure 11 is a cut-away view of one embodiment. Central electrode 27 is surrounded by an insulator 100, which itself is surrounded by a conductive tube or cylinder 103, which is then surrounded by another layer of insulator 105. Figure 12 illustrates the system in cross-sectional view, with similar numbering.

[0049] Figure 13 illustrates the insulator 100 in its initial configuration, after manufacture or just after

installation. A tip 110 of central electrode 27 is exposed, and surrounded by the conical surface 113 of the insulator 100. Cylindrical auxiliary electrode 103 is embedded within the insulator 100, and no tip or edge is exposed, as indicated by distance D8 in Figure 12.

[0050] The preceding discussion stated that the auxiliary electrode 72 may be connected at region 90 in Figure 7. In another embodiment, the auxiliary electrode 72 of Figure 14 is also connected to ground, but through a detector 150. Detector 150 looks for a current in auxiliary electrode 72. Current detectors are well known.

[0051] If no current is detected, it is inferred that the auxiliary electrode 72 is still embedded within insulator 75, as in Figure 7, and is electrically isolated from central electrode 27.

[0052] In contrast, if a current is detected, it is inferred that the auxiliary electrode has become exposed through erosion, as in Figure 9. The detected current is attributed to a plasma following path P6. When the current is detected, detector 150 issues a signal, sets a flag, or otherwise indicates the inference that erosion has exposed auxiliary electrode. A human technician at that time, or a prescribed time afterward, replaces the igniter.

[0053] An alternate mode of detection is to remove the igniter and visually examine the end corresponding to end E in Figure 2. If a smooth surface of the insulator 100 is seen, as in

Figure 13, then it is concluded that the igniter is still functional. However, if the auxiliary electrode 72 is seen, as in Figure 8, then it is concluded that replacement may be required.

[0054] In another embodiment, the auxiliary electrode is designed to become exposed, and then to erode rapidly. Figure 15, viewed left-to-right, illustrates first a newly installed igniter 160. After a period of usage, igniter 165 exposes its auxiliary electrode 72. Now a plasma P6 extends to the auxiliary electrode 72.

[0055] However, as stated above, the auxiliary electrode 72 is designed to erode rapidly. For example, as insert 170 indicates, the auxiliary electrode 72 is fabricated with a pointed end. Plasma 6 causes the pointed end to become rapidly eroded, as indicated by the small particles in frame 170. This operation causes a specific sequence of two events.

[0056] One is that, when the auxiliary electrode becomes first exposed, a current passes through the it. The current is detected, as by detector 150 in Figure 14. Next, after the auxiliary electrode fractures or erodes, no current passes through it.

[0057] One reason for this sequence is illustrated in Figure 16. Initially, the voltage V spans distance $D9$, creating an electric field equal to $V/D9$. After fracture or erosion, the same voltage V spans distance $D10$. The electric field equals $V/D10$, a smaller value. The latter electric field is insufficient to create a plasma, while the former is.

[0058] In one embodiment, the occurrence of the two events just described occurs prior to the termination of the lifetime of the igniter. Thus, that termination is signalled by the occurrence of a current through the auxiliary electrode 72, followed by a termination of that current. The onset of the current indicates the approach of the termination of the lifetime, but with time remaining to operate the engine. The subsequent termination of the current indicates that less time remains, and that replacement of the igniter becomes more important.

[0059] Figure 17 illustrates one embodiment of the auxiliary electrode 72. A neck, or groove, 190 is provided, which facilitates the breakage schematically illustrated in the insert 170 in Figure 15. The groove 190 is a region of mechanical weakness intentionally built into the auxiliary electrode 72. Prior to the erosion indicated in Figure 8, that weakness is not important, because mechanical support to the electrode is supplied by the insulator 75.

[0060] The discussion above stated that a high voltage is applied to electrode 27. It is possible that a low voltage applied to the electrode 27 can accomplish the same function of generating a plasma.

[0061] Numerous substitutions and modifications can be undertaken without departing from the true spirit and scope of the invention. What is desired to be secured by Letters Patent is the invention as defined in the following claims.